Mystery Of Weird Masks *the* Spartans Wore

One of the queerest of the Spartan masks — a grinning face modeled from terra cotta and with its cheeks seamed either with deep wrinkles or the marks left by the tattooer's needle

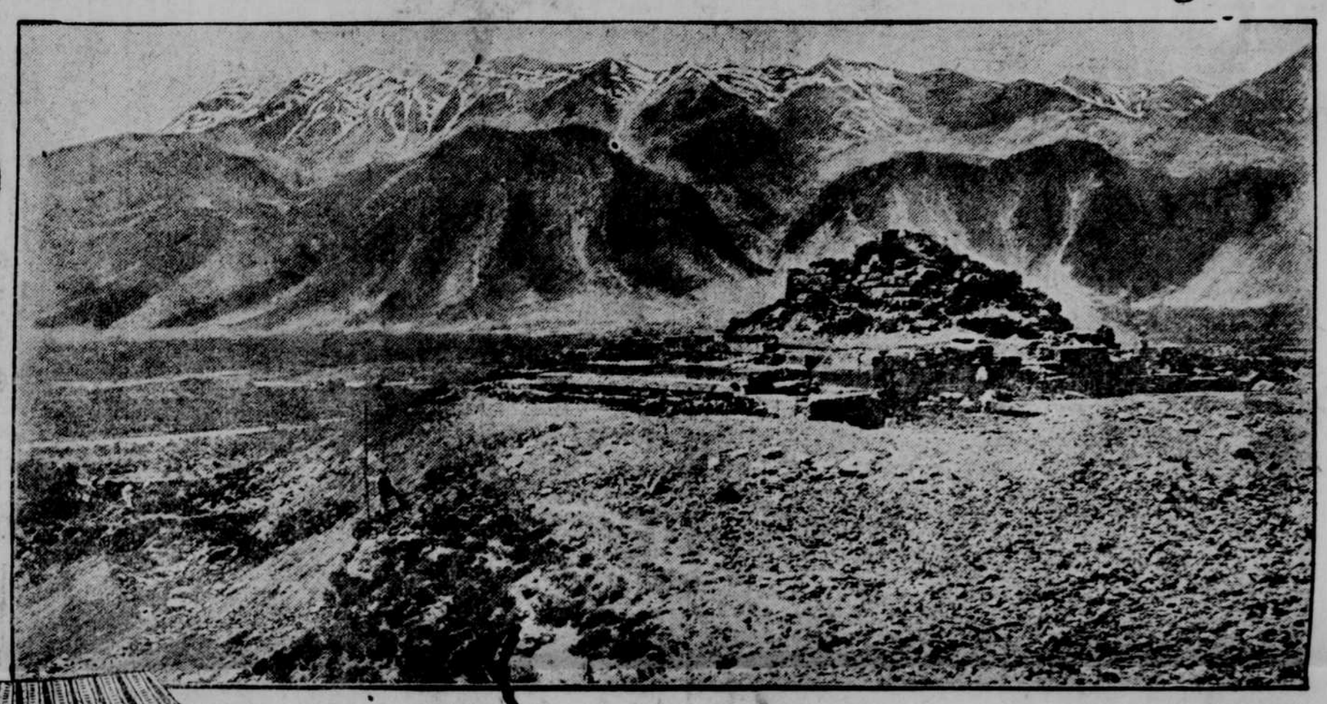
A very human mask showing the strong, typically Spartan face

One of the curiously wrinkled or tattooed "false faces"

The distorted face of an idiot with the neck swollen by a goitre

A toothless, wrinkled old man

Why Science Is Puzzled to Know What Uses Were Made of the Strange and Very Carefully Modeled "False Faces" Found in the Ancient Grecian City's Ruins



On the left, all that is visible today of the once proud and populous city of Sparta

THE large number of masks which have lately been brought to light from the ruins of the ancient Grecian city of Sparta—some terrifyingly weird, others comically grotesque, and still others marvelously human—form an interesting new puzzle for the historians and archæologists to ponder.

It has long been known that the actors of ancient Greece and Rome wore masks to give reality to the characters they were portraying. They were extensively used not only in the forerunner of our modern comedies and tragedies but also in certain ritual dramas of solemn religious significance.

But the frequency with which masks have been found in the ruins of Sparta and the extraordinary character of many of these "false faces" lead to the belief that here at least they were used for other purposes than to make actors look more realistic.

It is suggested that the wearing of some of the more hideous of these masks may have been a punishment which the Spartan authorities meted out to criminals and disobedient slaves. To be forced to hide one's countenance behind the simulation of an idiot's face, with his neck swollen with a great goitre, would, for example, have been a punishment to be dreaded.

Perhaps these and other similar distortions of the human face were a part of the Spartans' military strategy—worn into battle to terrify the enemy. A great many of the masks lately brought to light would seem to be admirably adapted for this purpose.

But not all the Spartan masks were things terrible to behold. Some of them were as funny as the false faces children wear to-day, and others reproduce with the most painstaking fidelity the strong, clean-cut features of what must have been very fine-looking men.

The most extraordinary of these masks are made of terra cotta and the workmanship of all of them shows that mask making must have been an art to which many Spartans devoted themselves with great enthusiasm.

What puzzles the archæologists more than anything else is the fact that in many of these masks the whole surface of the face is a mass of deep wrinkles. These lines in some instances are more like scars, and it is thought that perhaps they represent the tattooing found on certain varieties of slaves which the Spartans imported.

One of the finest vases of its type ever discovered—found in the ruins of Sparta, but believed to have been imported from Athens for use as a prize for some victorious athlete

One mask—the only one of its kind yet found—portrays with dreadful realism the countenance that is to this day characteristic of the form of idiocy known to medical science as cretinism. The distorted mouth and cheeks and the bulging goitre on the neck are modeled with the greatest accuracy.

The modeling revealed in some of the masks that show normal human faces is positively masterly and gives us an excellent idea of the characteristic Spartan type of face. The features are strongly marked, the chin being especially prominent. The nose is high and well formed and tends to droop at the end.

Besides the masks, recent excavations at Sparta have brought to light a wealth of other treasures and the British School at Athens is planning to resume work there next year on a large scale.

The site of the city is exceptionally well adapted for the archæologists' tasks. A large part of it is still free from modern buildings and covered by cornfields and groves of olive trees.

Just before the war put a stop to their labors British scholars made a complete survey of the site and its surroundings and excavated in several places. Their most sensational discovery was the Temple of Artemis Orthia, on the western bank of the River Eurotas. This was completely cleared and the finds here alone revolutionized all previous views on early Spartan art.

Lying in heaps on the rough cobble pavement of the precincts around the temple and the great altar were countless votive offerings, mostly dating from the ninth to the fifth centuries B. C. In fact, no such hoard of votive offerings had ever been found in Greece before.

Among masses of broken vases, many of which have since been pieced together, were hundreds of small leaden figurines, some representing the goddess, who was usually portrayed with curved wings; some soldiers; others horses, lions, goats and various animals. With these there were many thousands of tiny leaden wreaths, a good many examples of imitation jewelry, small votive shields and a number of objects which cannot yet be identified.

There was also a fine series of carved ivories, including small statuettes, seals of various shapes and designs and some delicately carved plaques which were fitted to the backs of bronze fibulæ, or safety pins.

Much of the pottery, too, was found to be of a type previously attributed to Cyrene, on the north coast of Africa, on the evidence of a vase showing the King of Cyrene supervising the packing of bales of silphion—an herb much prized in ancient times, but not yet identified by modern botanists. This beautiful pottery is now, however, recognized to be of Spartan origin.

Thanks to the generosity of the Greek government, examples of all the above finds have been recently presented to the British school at Athens and divided among the British Museum and the museums at Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Outside the Temple of Artemis Orthia much other work was done. On the Acropolis the Temple of Athena of the Brazen House was excavated, but the finds here, though interesting, were few, as the site was much denuded by the soil and debris from it being washed down the hill.

On the eastern bank of the river, the so-called "Menelaion" was examined, and beneath the Hellenic remains were found traces of the Mycenean settlement that had existed there before the Dorians came. These discoveries, however important though they are in themselves, give only an indication of what may be found when the center of the city is unearthed.

A. M. Woodward, who helped in the earlier excavations and has made a special study of Spartan inscriptions, will be in charge of the new expedition. He proposes to begin work on the southern slopes of the Acropolis, at the theater, the lower seats of which are at present under some ten feet or more of earth.

In Pausanias's description of Greece—a guidebook, written about 170 A. D.—there is a detailed but not very lucid account of the chief buildings and monuments of Sparta. From this account it appears that one of the principal streets of the city passed close to the theater, which is described as of "white stone and worth seeing."

The identification of this street would greatly simplify matters and in the most literal sense start the excavators on the high road to important discoveries.

The work in this part of the site will at first be slow and laborious, as a great depth of soil has to be removed before the ancient level is reached. It is possible, however, that this soil may contain the debris washed down from the Acropolis.

During the preliminary stages of the work opportunity will probably be taken to examine the foundations of the Byzantine walls, stretches of which are still standing. These are built to a great extent of ancient blocks and very possibly conceal many inscribed and sculptured stelæ taken from earlier buildings.

In Sparta the archæologists have at their disposal the best site in Greece and whatever they find cannot fail to be of interest. The depth of soil that covers the center of the city, though it means more labor at the outset, is in itself a guaranty that the site has not been plundered for many centuries.

When the new excavations are begun the archæologists will devote themselves particularly to a search for inscriptions and other clews to the mystery of the extraordinary masks already found there. Most of these Spartan masks are of terra cotta, while those that are known to have been used in the Greek theaters were usually made of linen, and sometimes of cork and wood.

The theatrical mask covered the whole of the head, both in front and behind. Caps were often worn underneath as a protection to the head. The white of the eye was painted on the mask, but the pupil was left hollow to enable the actor to see.

The expression of the masks worn by tragic characters was gloomy, and often fierce. The mouth was opened wide, to give a clear outlet to the actor's voice. The upper part of the mask stuck out above the forehead in a cone-shaped projection that was thought to lend size and dignity to the face. This projection varied in size, according to the character of the personage.

According to Pollux twenty-eight different masks were used in Greek tragedy. Of these six were for old men, eight for young, three for attendants and eleven for women. The principal features by which the different masks were distinguished from one another were the style of the hair, the color of the complexion, the expression of the eyes and the height of the mask's prolongation above the forehead, known as the "onkos."

The tyrant or other powerful man, for example, wore thick, black hair and beard, a tall "onkos" and a fierce frown upon his brow. The man wasted by disease had fair hair, a pale complexion and a smaller "onkos." The lover was distinguished by black hair and a pale complexion. The handsome youth had fair ringlets, a light complexion and bight eyes.

In this, as in all other respects, Greek tragedy was governed by the most conventional rules. As soon as an actor stepped on the stage his mask alone was enough to give the spectators a very fair conception of his character and position in the world. There was no need for them to consult their programs or wait for him to speak in order to understand who he was or what he was up to.

The use of masks was well adapted to the Greek drama because in this the different roles always represented certain well defined types of human nature rather than individual men and women, as is the case on the stage to-day.

The system had some obvious advantages, but to our minds they were badly outweighed by the fact that it made the drama a very stiff, wooden thing.

If the masks found in the ruins of Sparta were all used to give realism to actors then the theater must have been as popular there and perhaps have attained almost as high a state of development there as in Athens.

But many archæologists are of the opinion that, while some of these Spartan masks may have been so employed, others served quite different purposes.

Were they worn into battle? Was the wearing of them a punishment for certain crimes and misdemeanors? Were they worn in order to distinguish certain classes of citizens, servants and slaves from one another?

These are interesting questions and it is hoped that the coming extensive exploration of the ruins of Sparta will supply the answers.

Whatever can be added to our store of knowledge concerning life in Sparta is of more than ordinary interest. Probably no other city of the ancient world has taken a stronger hold on the popular imagination than this.

The wonderful stories that have come down to us of the Spartans' courage, their stern, simple virtues and the stoicism with which they endured suffering make us eager for every additional scrap of information about them.